
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
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Public Roundtable on
**District Government's Response to the
Crime Emergency**

Committee on the Judiciary
Phil Mendelson, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

September 29, 2006

Council Chamber
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, staff and guests. I appreciate this opportunity to update you on the status and results of the District's crime emergency. It has been about two-and-a-half months since I officially declared a "crime emergency," in order to confront a sharp escalation in crime and violence in our city. And it has been just over two months since the Council passed, and the Mayor signed, emergency legislation to support our anti-crime efforts. With that emergency legislation set to expire in the next few weeks, now is certainly a good time to step back and evaluate the impact of our efforts to-date, and to consider what we – as a government and as a community – need to do in order to achieve our common goal of a safer city for all.

Today's hearing, of course, follows a week of violence involving young people in the District, including the murders of three teenagers. These homicides are tragic, and the circumstances surrounding them are deeply troubling. However, I believe that it would be wrong to try and use these three tragic deaths as some type of a "referendum" on the crime emergency as a whole. As I have said on many occasions, the problem of youth violence goes a lot deeper than police deployment, curfews, technology and the like. It goes to the complex and far-reaching issues of parenting and schooling, poverty and economic opportunity, individual responsibility and community support.

As we look at the efforts of the Metropolitan Police Department and other entities during the current crime emergency, we must all keep in mind that this is not an "either-or" proposition: either focus on our immediate law enforcement needs as reflected in elements of the crime emergency, or focus on the long-term, underlying issues that contribute to crime in the first place. We need to do both things – and we need to do them simultaneously and we need to do them well. Addressing the underlying issues is complex and difficult work, and it will take considerable time and resources. In the meantime, we need to continue focusing on what are admittedly short-term responses to a very complicated problem.

As I will outline in my testimony, our efforts during the current crime emergency have produced tangible and very promising safety benefits for our communities. I firmly believe we need to continue these initiatives, in order to give our longer-range efforts a chance to develop and take root.

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Before getting into the facts and figures, I do want to explain very briefly just what the "crime emergency" entails, because I think there is some confusion about it. The current crime emergency really has two parts: the official declaration I made back on July 11, which suspends some scheduling provisions of the city's contract with the Fraternal Order of Police, and the emergency legislation that the Mayor proposed and the Council passed in support of our efforts. While in practice, these represent two elements of the same overall effort, there are operationally and legally separate.

On July 11, 2006, I declared a "crime emergency" in an attempt to enhance police visibility and combat neighborhood crime. As I just mentioned, declaring a crime emergency enabled me to suspend some scheduling provisions in the FOP contract, providing commanders with the flexibility to adjust schedules and put more officers where and when they are needed most. This flexibility was needed to confront a sharp escalation of crime in the previous 30 days, including an 18 percent

increase in robberies and 14 homicides in the first 11 days of July. Although the city had less crime in 2005 than in any year since the 1960s, the spike was an acceleration of a disturbing trend – a gradual increase in violent crime over the past year, caused primarily by a sharp rise in robberies. Equally troubling was a pronounced increase in juvenile involvement in crime, including an 82 percent increase in juveniles arrested for robbery. A quick response by the MPD was needed to ensure that the important gains in public safety achieved in recent years were not lost.

This is the fourth “crime emergency” I have declared in my eight-and-a-half years as chief. What was unique, and really very encouraging, about this particular declaration was the immediate and strong support we received from our partners in the federal and District governments. On July 14, I met with the leadership of more than two dozen city and federal agencies to ask them to design and implement specific steps to help us reverse the rise in violent crime. To an agency, they committed to focus resources on addressing issues having an immediate impact on crime, including environmental factors such as street lighting, abandoned vehicles, trash and the like, as well as enforcement, investigation, and prosecution efforts, including a new multi-agency task force focusing on violent crime. The group will be re-convening next month to review our progress and develop future strategies and priorities.

In addition to strong support from our operational partners, this crime emergency has benefited from unprecedented support from the Council. As you well know, at the request of Mayor Williams, Chairman Cropp called the Council into an emergency legislative session in July to consider – and ultimately approve – a legislative package aimed at reversing the spike in crime. The Council’s support has made a tremendous difference in the effectiveness and impact of the current crime emergency. The positive impact has been particularly evident in the area of police manpower. Because of overtime funding provided by the Council, I was able to implement a six-day work week for all sworn members. This has allowed us to deploy several hundred more officers on the streets, in high-crime areas and during critical time periods.

I understand that we cannot continue with six-day work weeks forever. In fact, earlier this month, I scaled back the initiative to make it an every-other-week requirement. However, there are still many police officers who would welcome the opportunity to work more overtime on a voluntary basis. With continued support from the Council, I am confident that we can maintain a heightened police presence in our neighborhoods.

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The additional manpower provided through overtime and scheduling adjustments – along with other elements of the emergency legislation passed by the Council – have produced two measurable results. First, crime in DC is down sharply – including crime involving young people during curfew hours. Second, crime-fighting activity by the police is way up – including arrests and the confiscation of firearms.

My staff has prepared and distributed a brief report summarizing the impact of the crime emergency to date. I think our record of success, during a relatively brief but intense period of activity, is certainly noteworthy. I want to touch on just a few of the highlights for you today.

Since I declared the crime emergency on July 11, overall crime in the District is down by almost 14 percent, when compared with the same time period of 2005. Violent crime is down by about 15 percent during this time period. This trend has been citywide in scope, with crime reductions in six of the seven police districts, including two districts – the First District and the Third District – that have been trending in the opposite direction for most of the year.

Just as importantly, the crime emergency has helped to reverse the spike in crime – in particular the spike in violent crime – that prompted the emergency declaration in the first place. For example, homicides rose steadily from April of this year, peaking during the first half of July. Since then, the number of homicides has plummeted – declining 46 percent between July and August. And even with the murders involving juveniles this past week, homicides have stabilized during September. As you will see from one of the charts in your handout, homicides were essentially even with last year when I declared the crime emergency back on July 11. Since then, homicides have fallen by about 26 percent. As of today, our homicide count is about 9 percent below the total at this time last year, and 2005 was our lowest year for homicide since 1986.

Perhaps even more telling is the recent trend with respect to robbery, which is a crime, usually on the public space, that provokes a great deal of fear among residents. As such, robbery is a good indicator of violence on our neighborhood streets. Prior to the crime emergency, robberies were running 15 percent ahead of last year's total. Since the crime emergency, robberies have been reduced by about 22 percent, and are now running only about 1 percent above last year. We certainly hope to get that number into "negative territory" before the end of the year. Robberies declined by 25 percent between July and August alone, meaning that there were 100 fewer victims last month.

So the crime emergency has certainly produced dramatic reductions in crime, in a very short period of time and in almost every part of the city. The crime reductions can be attributed, in part, to substantial increases in police activity over the past two-and-a-half months. Arrests of adults are up by about 3 percent since July 12; arrests of juveniles have risen 23 percent. From July 12 through September 24, our officers recovered 530 illegal firearms, an increase of 14 percent over the same period of 2005. And that total does not even include the 337 firearms we recovered during the gun buy-back held earlier this month, with funding provided by the Council. Finally, curfew citations have ballooned by 175 percent during the crime emergency, reflecting the earlier curfew hours the Mayor has imposed. But even if you look only at curfews written after midnight, the number has risen by almost 30 percent during the crime emergency.

I do not believe it is mere accident or coincidence that crime has decreased so significantly and law enforcement activity has increased so sharply during the current crime emergency. Primary credit for these positive trends goes to our police officers and the civilian employees who support them. I am extremely proud of the hard work, dedication and sacrifice of our members. I understand they have families and family obligations too. But when the call went out to do something about an intolerable spike in crime in our city, they responded with the energy and professionalism that are hallmarks of the Metropolitan Police Department. I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank and salute all of the men and women of our agency. You have made a real difference in the lives of our residents.

The crime emergency results also illustrate what can happen when a sense of focus and urgency by the police is supported by strong leadership and support from the Mayor and the Council. To continue the progress we have made to date, it is critically important that certain elements of the emergency legislation that was enacted in July be extended beyond the October 19 expiration date. And in the case of Closed Circuit Television, it is essential that we have more time to evaluate more fully the effectiveness of this approach in combating crime in our neighborhoods. Our initial analysis suggests that CCTV cameras do hold great promise for curbing neighborhood crime.

Over the past several weeks, our Department installed a total of 48 cameras, spanning all seven police districts in the city. This was a truly Herculean effort on the part of the MPD, the District Department of Transportation, the Office of Contracting and Procurement, and others, to get that many cameras up and running in such a short period of time. To date, we have had a handful of cases in which detectives have reviewed video from the cameras, but none has produced useful evidence thus far.

But keep in mind that CCTV is not simply about solving crimes that have already occurred. Experience suggests that CCTV cameras can have an impact on preventing crime and enhancing perceptions of safety in neighborhoods that have cameras. We are currently analyzing both of these factors. And while our results are preliminary, they are also very encouraging.

Based on our analysis of locations where cameras were installed during August, violent crime has decreased by 73 percent when compared to the same period of 2005. Property crime has decreased by 57 percent, producing an overall 64 percent reduction in crime in the “viewsheds” of those particular cameras. We plan to expand this analysis to include more cameras, a longer time frame and any “spill-over” effect the cameras may have on locations near the cameras.

In addition to analyzing preliminary crime data, our Department also conducted a brief survey of the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners representing those locations with cameras installed during August. Fourteen of 21 Commissioners we contacted responded, and their response was overwhelmingly positive about the cameras. The vast majority of ANC Commissioners stated that people feel safer with cameras in their neighborhoods; they believe that CCTV cameras will help prevent crime, and they want additional cameras in their neighborhoods. All but one Commissioner said they had received positive feedback from residents living in the areas with cameras, and 77 percent reported receiving very positive feedback.

These perceptions of neighborhood safety are important because individual perceptions ultimately affect behavior. In other words, people are more likely to go out in their neighborhoods when they feel safe. And when more law-abiding residents are out in our neighborhoods, criminal activity tends to diminish.

I recognize that CCTV cameras have not totally eliminated crime from the locations where cameras have been installed. Last Sunday’s double homicide on 13th Place, SE, is evidence of that. But it is also important to remember that the locations with cameras are, after all, areas with significant crime problems to begin with. So it should not be unexpected that there would be criminal activity there. But it appears that criminal activity has been reduced – and reduced significantly. We could certainly use more time to gauge the cameras’ effectiveness and impact.

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One other element of the emergency legislation that has had a measurable impact on crime is the Mayor's authority to adjust curfew hours. In late July, as you know, the Mayor exercised that authority and set the curfew from 10 pm to 6 am, seven days a week. Under normal conditions, the curfew begins at 12 midnight during the summer, and at 11 pm on school nights during the rest of the year. Just this week, the Mayor extended the 10 pm start of the curfew through October 19, the date the current emergency legislation expires.

As I noted earlier, the alternative curfew have served to dramatically increase the number of curfew citations issued by our police officers. In fact, between July 12 and September 24, just over half of the 3,000 curfew citations were issued between 10 pm and midnight. But our goal is not to keep our curfew centers busy. It is to keep DC's youth off the streets so that they will be safer and less likely to become involved in delinquent or criminal activity.

Comparing the 59 days prior to the alternative curfew hours going into effect to the 56 days after the change, we have documented reductions in both victimization and offending involving curfew-age juveniles. For example the number of curfew-age victims of violent crime on public space during the 10 pm-to-6 am time period declined from 10 to 5, when comparing the pre- and post- time periods, a reduction of 50 percent. Similarly, the number of curfew-age juveniles arrested for crimes committed during the curfew hours plunged 43 percent, from 89 to 50.

Our goal with curfew enforcement has never been to "hassle" young people or single them out for some type of discriminatory treatment. Our goal has been, and always will be, to help protect our young people from crime, as either victims or offenders. Even with the earlier curfew hours, we have not been able to prevent all such occurrences. The fatal shooting of 14-year-old Andre Pee, at 11:15 pm last Sunday night in Congress Heights, demonstrates that a curfew will never completely eliminate juvenile involvement in crime. But our data shows pretty clearly that the earlier curfew is making a difference in promoting the safety of our young people.

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The crime emergency plan includes other measures that are more difficult to evaluate in such a short time frame, but which I believe should be part of any comprehensive effort to reduce crime. For example, the plan provides additional funding for youth anti-violence programs, mediation efforts and increased recreational opportunities. The legislation also includes important criminal justice reforms that make it harder for violent suspects to get back on the street and that ease bureaucratic red tape in the sharing of critical information among agencies about certain serious juvenile offenders.

Sharing limited, but critical information about some of the most serious juvenile offenders is vitally important, especially as our government redoubles its efforts to intervene in the lives of our young people and prevent them from becoming career criminals as adults. In recent weeks, we have been developing the systems and procedures to ensure a smooth and timely flow of information among agencies, in a manner that protects confidentiality. We hope to fully implement this system in the

near future. Keeping this element of the emergency legislation is essential if we are to fully develop and use these procedures and evaluate their effectiveness in addressing juvenile crime.

Combating crime in DC – in particular, combating juvenile crime in our city – will always require a variety of approaches and strategies. And while some people tend to latch on to things such as a crime emergency as being the one “magic” answer to the problem, the reality is that there is no one answer ... no single solution.

I do believe that elements of the crime emergency legislation are certainly important – and effective – components of our overall crime reduction strategy. At a minimum, we should extend them – if for no other reason than to give us more time and data to more fully evaluate their effectiveness. And if they continue to be shown to be effective, as the preliminary data suggest, then we should look to make them permanent parts of our crime-fighting arsenal.

I started my testimony by stating that police deployment, Closed Circuit Television cameras, curfews and the like will never be the “be-all, end-all” to the complex problem of crime in the District of Columbia. These approaches will never replace responsible parenting, good schools, economic opportunity and strong communities. But they do contribute to the overall safety and well-being of our communities. And they do provide some short-term relief, while our longer-range strategies are given a chance to take hold.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My staff and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have about my testimony or the handout.